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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000536

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DEPT FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OPPOSITION MUSTERS QUORUM TO TAKE OVER
ADDIS CITY COUNCIL

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: After several failed attempts, candidates elected to the Addis Ababa Regional Council under the CUD banner in May 2005 have finally mustered quorum to take over the government of Ethiopia's capital city. Since the official deadline for registration has passed, Prime Minister Meles -- at the Charge's request -- agreed to accept a petition from at least 69 council-members elect pledging to take their seats "without preconditions." Meles told the Charge Feb. 20 that the National Electoral Board (NEB) would have to certify the group's 71 signatures as genuine, after which the NEB would forward a request to Parliament to reopen the registration period. Parliament is out of session until mid-March, but a political commitment from PM Meles could guarantee legislative approval earlier. The would-be Addis City Administration must still wrestle with what to call its coalition, since the name CUD remains verboten, and public anger is still widespread over the continuing detention of other CUD leaders. Comment: While this initiative remains fragile, its successful completion will constitute a major achievement on the road to Ethiopian democracy. Objections from the Diaspora and jailed CUD leaders notwithstanding, an opposition-controlled city government offers a real opportunity to reduce political tensions, open new political space and give the party formerly known as CUD a concrete platform. Today the organizer of the effort, Ato Ayele, turned over the petition to the NEB with 70 signatures of would be city administrators. The NEB will verify the signatures and send the petition to the Parliament. The PM says he is pleased. Let's hope there are no slips between the cup and the lip. End Summary.

Last-Ditch Petition Drive Goes Over the Top

12. (SBU) Addis Ababa Regional Council member-elect Ayele Chamiso and a group of associates finally rounded up an adequate number of signatures on Feb. 19 to take over the administration of Ethiopia's capital "without pre-conditions." Internal divisions within the party formerly known as the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) had derailed earlier efforts over the last two months to muster a quorum of 68-71 council members to take over the city. Some council members-elect had previously opposed taking office until Berhanu Nega, the CUD leader who was informally selected by the coalition to serve as mayor in September 2005, was released from jail. Others had insisted

on taking office under the banner of the CUD, despite the fact that the party is no longer recognized by the NEB. Ayele, formerly member of the UEDP-Medhin component of the CUD, apparently overcame these objections after conveying to other council members-elect the strong desire of the international community that opposition representatives take the reins in Addis Ababa in order to advance the democratic process. Charge Huddleston and other Western diplomats had met with Ayele and other council members-elect several times in January and February to encourage their efforts. The Charge also interceded directly with PM Meles to allow more time for enough former CUD-members to come forward. The idea of a formal petition to reopen the registration process emerged from the Charge's meeting with CUD representatives in early February and was subsequently -- and somewhat reluctantly -- accepted by Meles, who said it would be "a miracle" if Ayele were successful in gathering enough support.

Next Steps: NEB Verification, then Parliamentary Approval

13. (SBU) In a telephone conversation with the Charge Feb. 20, PM Meles indicated that the NEB would accept the petition from City Council members-elect as long as it could verify that the 71 signatures were genuine. If the petition checked out, Meles said the next step would be for the NEB to forward a request to Parliament for approval to reopen the formal registration process. Parliament is currently out of session until mid-March, but approval for the request would be a foregone conclusion if the GOE supports it. Ayele told the Charge Feb. 20 that his group would in fact benefit from an interval of several weeks before the changeover took place in order to prepare for the new responsibilities.

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Challenge One: Continued GOE Harassment

14. (C) If the current initiative continues to prosper, the new government of Addis Ababa will face some daunting challenges. The first is continued GOE pressure on and harassment of CUD members. The City Council organizing committee chaired by Ayele told the Charge, EU Troika representatives and the French Chair of the Ambassadors' Donors Group (ADG) on Feb. 20 that the GOE continued to follow them everywhere they went. One woman, Etalemahu Worku, claimed that security agents had warned her in January to cease her involvement with the CUD or the kindergarten that she runs would be closed down for "administrative reasons." She refused to comply, but remained concerned. The group claimed that 30 Council-members elect from Addis had been arrested immediately following November 2005 riots, but that 14 had since been released. Others remained in custody, some still without charge. Council-members elect also complained that party offices are still closed down, and that documents confiscated during November raids had not been returned. Among the documents seized were those laying out plans for administering Addis Ababa as well as lists of possible appointees for key positions throughout the city. Finally, some members of the organizing group expressed concern that the GOE was planning to undermine the former CUD officials through state media for lack of cooperation, and ultimately disband their city government after a few months.

15. (C) The Charge and Troika reps undertook to raise the issues mentioned by the group to the Prime Minister and other EPRDF officials in the coming days. Most diplomats agreed that the EPRDF did not want to run the capital any longer given the strong anti-government sentiment in Addis.

Challenge Two: Diaspora and Popular Opposition

16. (C) The organizing group also expressed apprehension about

how the public in Addis would receive their takeover of the city against the wishes of the CUD's imprisoned leaders and the Diaspora. They complained that they had no media outlet through which to convince the public of their reasons for assuming power without obtaining the release of jailed CUD leaders. Ayele and others recounting how they had done interviews with Voice of America (VOA) journalists, but their comments had never been broadcast. They also claimed that VOA journalists had pursued slanted, aggressive lines of questioning that appeared to push the views of hard-line elements of the Diaspora. Pol/Econ Counselor undertook to facilitate more suitable access for leaders of the City Council to VOA broadcasts.

¶17. (C) The single greatest concern of the City Council members-elect, however, was the GOE's refusal to recognize the CUD or allow them to take office as CUD members. Ayele and others explained that they all considered themselves members of the CUD, and that the public in Addis Ababa remained adamant in its desire to be ruled by the CUD as such. Publicly adopting another name would cost the group dearly in terms of popular support, they said. While committee members were reluctantly leaving their formal party affiliation aside for the moment, they told diplomats that they were considering various approaches to resubmitting a merger request to the NEB in hopes that the CUD would regain official recognition.

¶18. (C) The Charge conveyed to the group that the GOE planned to formally ban the CUD as an organization at some point in the relatively near future. She urged that the group not push the issue of party affiliation while it was taking over the city, and that it consider carefully how to proceed afterwards. The ambassador from current EU President Austria recommended that members of the former CUD adopt a minor change in coalition's name in order to get around eventual legal obstacles. The group remained cool to the suggestion, however.

Challenge Three: Technical Capacity

¶19. (C) The other main challenge confronted by new City Council would be a shortage of top-tier, trained personnel. Aliyu Mohammed reminded diplomatic reps that several of the CUD's most capable officials, including mayor-elect Berhanu

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Nega, were still in jail. Few of those remaining had much political experience or many contacts in the international community, he added. Pol/Econ Counselor and others chimed in to assure Council members-elect that the international community wanted them to succeed and would prepare packages of technical assistance to support them. He further urged the group to reach beyond its immediate ranks to solicit advice and expertise from the many professionals in the capital that sympathized with the CUD.

Comment: City Government a Major Milestone on Road to Democracy

¶10. (C) While arrangements for the opposition to take over Addis Ababa remain fragile, successful completion of this initiative will constitute a major achievement on the road to Ethiopian democracy. Objections from the Diaspora and jailed CUD leaders notwithstanding, an opposition-controlled city government offers a real opportunity to reduce political tensions, open new political space and give the party formerly known as CUD a concrete platform. The EPRDF is more likely to release senior CUD leaders and other detainees on bail -- another important milestone in the process of putting democracy back on track -- if members of their former party are firmly committed to participation in the country's democratic institutions. Formal recognition of the CUD per se is another issue that can best be addressed after

confidence building steps, like the transfer of power in Addis, have been completed.

¶11. (C) Opposition control will also send a strong message to the Ethiopian public and the donor community that progress toward democracy is possible through patient, peaceful strengthening of the country's democratic institutions. Council-members concerns about a negative popular reaction to their latest step are legitimate, but the group should be able to win over popular opinion gradually with able political and administrative management. The ADG plans to issue a statement welcoming plans to transfer authority over Addis Ababa to the opposition after confirming acceptance of the petition and consulting further with both the GOE and the Council members-elect.

HUDDLESTON